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ABSTRACT

Most research on battered women concerns women of working class and middle class backgrounds. This study examined differences between poor and non-poor battered women and ways in which poverty mediates the experience of intimate violence. Subject data were obtained on 57 cases of battered women who killed their abusers between 1978 and 1984. Statistical tests were conducted to compare the 30 poor subjects to the 27 non-poor subjects. The results revealed that, compared to non-poor subjects, poor subjects were more likely to be non-white, undereducated, have violence in their family backgrounds, report that they killed their abuser while an attack was ongoing, and have used knives to kill their abuser. They were less likely to have been legally married to their abuser, to have used a gun to kill their abuser, and to have had expert testimony at their trials. These findings illustrate the existence of both demographic and experiential differences between the poor and the non-poor battered women who killed their abusers. In spite of the unlikely inclusion of expert testimony at trials of poor women, rates of acquittal at trial were not statistically different, possibly due to the finding that poor women used violence at a time that was easier for the jurors to understand as self-defense. (NB)

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Exploring the Impacts of Poverty on Battered Women Who Kill Their Abusers

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Exploring the Impacts of Poverty on Battered Women Who Kill Their Abusers[1]

"Doctor, are you saying that Damian Pizarro, who does not have traditional family values, is still a battered woman? You have testified in other trials that battered women have traditional family values. If Ms. Pizarro does not have traditional family values, how can she be a battered woman?"

This question was posed by an Assistant District Attorney (DA) in Manhattan during the trial of Damian Pizarro, a battered woman who killed her abuser. Her trial took place in April of 1988. I testified at Ms. Pizarro's trial as an expert witness, as a social psychologist with an expertise in the psychological consequences of family violence for its victims. I responded to the DA's question by explaining that much of the literature on battered women had been done with middle or working class women and that the experiences of very poor women like Damian Pizarro had not been well represented in our research, to date. I said that I had come to understand that social class played an important role in mediating the experience of battering in an intimate relationship and that the current model of "the battered

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1 This paper deals with issues of social class and explicitly does not deal with issues of race. Of course, to some extent this is a problematic distinction, since too often poor people are non-white people. Indeed, in this study, class and race were confounded. However, a deliberate decision was made to limit this discussion to social class differences. Future work remains to be done on the import of other factors such as race.

woman" relied upon by the criminal justice system was in need of refinement.2

Damian's experiences were not reflected in the typology of characteristics for battered women, which appears in Walker's (1979) book, The Battered Woman. Not only could Damian be said not to hold traditional family values, she also was not isolated, another of the traits thought to characterize battered women. Many people knew about the violence she had endured. She reported the violence done to her and did not withhold the truth about her injuries from the police, from hospital personnel, from interested members of the clergy, from friends or relatives. And, she did not accept responsibility for the batterer's actions nor did she feel guilty for his violence. (See Frieze, 1979, for work on the attributions typical of battered women.) Damian held Emerson Gaylor primarily responsible for his violence and experienced anger and fear in response to his threatened and actual violence. Nor was the DA persuaded that Damian was low enough in self esteem to "qualify" as a battered woman. After all, he argued, wasn't she proud of her art work? Thus, he argued, Damian Pizarro was not really a battered woman, and my testimony which was presented as a part of her legal defense ought to be disregarded. He argued that I attempted to shape the theory to fit her experiences and that I was speaking out of bias

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2 Indeed, Walker's (1979) The Battered Woman functions like the Bible about battered women. It remains unchallenged by diagnostic categories in the DSM-III-R, the more typical Bible of psychologists in the courtroom, since Battered Woman Syndrome does not appear there.

and not out of objectivity based in firm scientific findings.

Unfortunately, the DA was right when he asserted that Damian's experiences are not the experiences that our work on battered women has made "typical." (e.g., Blackman, 1986, 1987; Browne, 1984, 1987; Frieze, 1979; Walker, 1979, 1984). Yet, I suspect that Damian's atypicality is an artifact of our research. That is, researchers made the experiences of working and middle class battered women typical because those were the women who would participate in our research, those who would inform us. Elsewhere, I have termed such research "lamppost" research (Blackman, in press). The term, "lamppost" research, implies that only those who step forward into the light can be accounted for. Those who do not step into the light, who do not participate in our studies remain unknown. And, when the topic is as sensitive as battering, we must acknowledge that what we do not know may be important. In Damian's case, what we did not know, might have meant the difference between conviction and acquittal in the stabbing death of her abuser. Fortunately, in Damian Pizarro's case, the jury was persuaded (or at least not deterred) by the assertion that social class made a difference in the experience of battering, even though the research on this question is just beginning. Damian was acquitted of murder and manslaughter charges by a jury of seven men and five women who deliberated for a day and a half.

Overview

What follows in the next section is a discussion of reasons

for the inattention to the impact of social class on battered women. It is also an advocacy for attention to social class. Then, I am going to talk about differences between non-poor and poor battered women in a data set compiled by Sue Osthoff, the Director of the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, and myself. Fifty-nine cases of battered women who killed their abusers between 1978 and 1984 are the data base for investigations into differences between poor and non-poor battered women that might shed light on the ways in which poverty mediates the experience of intimate violence.

Reasons for the Inattention to the Impact of Social Class on Battered Women

Battered Women Are Not "Other"

It is no accident that concerns based on social class have received little attention in the literature on battered women. For example, Walker in the introduction to her 1979 book wrote that battered women come from every socio-economic background. She added that if you are a woman, chances are one in two that you could be a battered woman! A central purpose of the early empirical work on battered women is revealed by this comment: to remove battered women from the "other" category. It was important for people to understand that any woman could be battered. To deal extensively, ten years ago, with differences due to social class would have been divisive and might well have functioned to maintain the perception of battered woman as "other."

Debunking the Masochism Myth and Redefining Battering as a Social Problem

Historically, Freudian-shaped views of victims of battering cast them as masochists and suggested that battered women liked the abuse, or at least provoked or deserved it. Perhaps the kindest old view of battered women labeled them as "crazy." In this case, uncontrollable aspects of themselves, their insanity, led them to tolerate their abuser's violence. While crazy women were not like the rest of us, at least they were not held fully responsible for the violence or for their remaining in the relationship. Nonetheless, both of these historic constructions of the battered woman -- as a masochist or as a victim of her own insanity -- placed the blame on her.

The situation of middle class women allowed such considerations of woman-blame, since the middle class women's apparent access to resources made it seem that they could have left violent men if they had wanted to. No masochism need be invoked to explain the failure of very poor women to move away. One can not move when one has no money and no where to go. Thus, the circumstances of very poor women offered less potential for debunking the masochism myth, which was an essential first step in understanding the contribution of society to the plight of battered women. If women were not masochists and were not crazy, then explanations for the violence they endured could be more properly focused on the victimizer and the society which supported his violence, informally and formally. Since

redefining wife battering as a social problem was an important and necessary objective of the early work, attention to very poor women would have made this objective harder to attain.

Feminism and Men Who Are Not Princes of the Patriarchy

Any early attention to a problem is likely to over-simplify it. Time and continued attention lead to refinement. Batterers are, of course, more powerful than the women they batter and this greater power includes not only their greater physical strength, but also the greater sense of entitlement and opportunity bequeathed to them by the patriarchal nature of society. For middle class men, such assertions of social power, relative to their women, are accurate. For very poor men, the promises of the patriarchy may afford them little in the way of real social power. The limited access to resources (e.g., jobs, independent income, housing) used to explain, in part, the sense of helplessness that may characterize battered women, is a part of the experience of very poor men, too. Poverty and the impacts of class-based deprivations reduce opportunities for poor women and poor men in ways that are more similar than dissimilar.

While middle class men may be princes of the patriarchy, very poor men are not. While many feminists would identify sexism as the primary conceptual frame in which battering occurs, for the very poor, poverty and classism may provide an alternative frame. In the early days of work on battered women, such a statement would have derailed the mission of the work. Perhaps, our feminist assertions about the role of sexism in the

plight of battered women notwithstanding, we may still allow that poverty and classism are at least as devastating in their impacts on women's opportunities to be free from violence. Such an assertion may have blurred the importance of attention to gender in the early days. However, our work has secured the place of gender and sexism. It is right to see attention to class as a next step. While many in the battered women's movement have seen the importance of class, the community of researchers has not yet explored this factor in depth.

The Fear of Making Poor People Seem Dangerous, Especially Poor Battered Women Who Kill Their Abusers

In some ways, this final reason offered for the inattention to social class brings us back to the first and pertains to the wish not to make victims of violence "other." In addition, whenever the basis for naming someone "other" involves violence, there is the risk of making that "other" seem generally dangerous. This risk is compounded by the likely statistical truth that rates of violence are not equivalent across classes. To deny this is potentially to deprive those who need more resources from receiving them (Pelton, 1978). In my opinion, studies that do not do special outreach to the very poor can not offer accurate incidence estimates of rates of violence in different social classes. Very poor people are less likely to participate in surveys and other research efforts. My work in the criminal justice system is certainly persuasive with regard to the idea that there are too many poor people there. Thus, in

the interests of pursuing what is real, the fear must be confronted.

Identifying social class as a part of the violence picture risks making poor people seem dangerous. This is a special burden for poor battered women who fight back and kill their abusers. Then, the complex and combined burdens of sexism and classism fall heavily upon them. However, in the absence of good information about the psychological toll taken by poverty, and its import in the family, our off-base, "lamppost" knowledge renders them falsely atypical, not "normal" battered women, and decreases the ability of social scientists working within the criminal justice system to put their acts in their right context. Thus, the contextualizing that is almost routinely accorded to the life-taking acts of "traditional" battered women is often denied battered women made "non-traditional" by poverty.

The nature of this special burden was illustrated by the DA's questions in the case of Damian Pizarro which I used to open paper. Until the complex connections among gender, class and intimate violence are explored, our important, but classist work, can disadvantage women like Damian Pizarro. This following study reflects an advocacy for and a beginning in the effort to add social class to feminist formulations about battered women.

The Research Questions

The basic question posed by the research was this: Are the lives and experiences of poor battered women who kill their abusers different from those who are not poor? If so, how are

they different?3 A secondary question grew out of the connections between this work and the criminal justice system: In this sample, did women of different social classes fare differently in the courtroom?

Method

Subjects

Fifty-nine women who killed their abusers and who came to the attention of the criminal justice system (i.e., they were subject to indictment for his death), represent the data base.4 Approximately half (50.8%, n=30) of these women were poor, that is they were welfare recipients or were welfare class (e.g., they lived off minimal income generated through street life activities, such as prostitution or drug sales), the other half

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3 While this study dealt only with battered women who killed their abusers, research by Browne (1984, 1987) contrasted the experiences of homicidal and non-homicidal battered women. In When Battered Women Kill, Browne (1987) indicated that battered women who killed their abusers were not significantly different in terms of social class from battered women who did not kill their abusers. To the extent that the trend reflected a difference, Browne (1987) suggested that battered women who kill may be slightly higher in social class than those who do not. It is not a purpose of this study who describe battered women who kill in comparison with those who do not. However, it is worth noting that battered women who kill, according to Browne (1987) are not very different from those who do not in terms of social class, and that any apparent differences "favor" women who kill. Thus, while this study deals only with women who have killed, it seems likely that they resemble battered women who have not killed, and provide some insight into the general situation of battered women.

4 The Pennsylvania portion of the sample is virtually a complete record of such homicides for the city of Philadelphia between 1985 and 1987.

(45.8%, n=27) were better off than welfare class (non-poor).5 Approximately 73% (72.9%,n=43) of these women were non-white; 27.1% (n=16) were white. The average number of years of education was 11.022 (SD=2.071). They ranged in age from 21 to 63, with a mean age of 33.179 (SD=9.913). Approximately one-third (32.2%, n=19) were legally married to their abusers, the remaining two thirds (66.1%, n=39) were not. The length of their relationships (married or otherwise) ranged from under a year to 30 years, with a mean duration of 8.3 years (SD=13.7). The partners' ages at the time of their deaths ranged from 23 to 69, with a mean of 38.0 (SD=12.05). The median age difference was 2.6 years. Most of the women were from Pennsylvania (50.8%, n=30) or New York (39.0%, n=23), with smaller numbers from New Jersey (6.8%, n=4) or West Virginia (1.7%, n=1). Approximately 35% (35.2%, n=19) were convicted at trial, 27.8% (n=15) pled guilty and 37.0% (n=20) were acquitted at trial. Expert testimony was offered in 38.9% (n=21) of their trials. I was always the expert.

Data Analysis

With the exception of one analysis of variance (ANOVA), the statistical tests comparing the poor to the non-poor women were Chi-Square comparisons. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a p value of .10 was used as the cutoff.

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5 Missing data here and throughout are created by incomplete records or unusual events that were recoded as missing. For example, only one woman in the data set was not indicted by the grand jury. Her case was dropped from the analyses which included outcome as a variable.

Results

The Relationship between Social Class and Other Demographic Characteristics

Marital Status. Poor women were less likely to be legally married to the men they killed, than were non-poor women (see Table 1). Only about 17% of the poor women were married to their abusers, as compared with about 48% of the non-poor women ($p = .02$).

Race. Poor women were slightly more likely to be non-white than were non-poor women (see Table 2). About 83% of the poor women were non-white, as compared with about 59% of the non-poor women ($p = .08$).

Education. A one-way ANOVA showed a tendency for poor women to have completed fewer years of schooling (mean = 10.5600, SD = 1.5297) than non-poor women (mean = 11.5714, SD= 2.5014). The F value for the ANOVA was 2.833, $p = .0994$ (see Table 3).

The Relationship between Social Class and Experiences of Violence

Violence in the Woman's Family of Origin. Poor women were significantly more likely to report violence in their family backgrounds than were non-poor women (see Table 4). About 83% of the poor women reported that violence was present in their families, as compared with 52% of the non-poor women ($p = .05$).

The Nature of the Final Episode of Violence. Women defendants' descriptions of the events leading up to their lethal act were categorized in terms of whether or not the attack

against them was ongoing (in progress) when they acted. Poor women were more likely to report that they struck out while an attack was ongoing than were non-poor women (see Table 5). About 93% of the poor women fought back against on ongoing assault, as compared with 69% of the non-poor women (p= .05).

The Weapon. Poor women were more likely to use knives and less likely to use guns than were non-poor women (see Table 6). About 83% of the poor women used knives, 17% used guns. For non-poor women, 58% used knives, 42% used guns (p=.08).

The Relationship between Social Class and the Trial

The Inclusion of Expert Testimony. Poor women were less likely to have expert testimony presented at their trials. Only 25% offered such testimony, compared with about 54% of non-poor women (see Table 7).

Summary

The primary research question asked: Are the lives and experiences of poor battered women who kill their abusers different from those who are not poor? If so, how are they different? There were differences, both demographic and experiential between the poor and the non-poor battered women who killed their abusers. Poor battered women were more likely than non-poor battered women to be unmarried to the abuser, non-white, undereducated. The finding that poor women are too likely to be non-white only shows what we already know about the relationship between class and race in this society. That poor women are undereducated is also no surprise. Poverty interferes with

schooling in many different ways. Only the finding that poor battered women are less likely to be married than their non-poor counterparts, provides insight into a limitation of the model of battered woman as "traditionalist." Non-marriage is a less traditional state of intimacy than marriage in popular American culture. Thus, poverty co-occurs with non-traditionality.

With regard to their life histories, poor battered women were more likely than non-poor battered women to have come from violent families. Again, notions of what is "traditional" for families is implicit here. Certainly, violence in the family creates a different sense of what is "traditional" than does non-violence.

The killings themselves were different across the two groups. Poor battered women were more likely to fight back when the attack was ongoing. Thus, their actions conformed more closely to the standard definiton of self-defense than did the actions of non-battered women. They were more likely to use a knife and less likely to use a gun than were non-poor women. Knives are less expensive than guns.

At trial, non-poor battered women were more likely to offer expert testimony as context for their lethal act. This is not surprising, particularly since the existing model of the battered woman may not have reflected the experiences of poor women.

<u>No Differences in Acquittal Rates</u>

In spite of the unlikely inclusion of expert testimony at trials of poor women, rates of acquittal at trial were not

statistically different. This may be due to the fact that more poor women used violence at a time that was easier for the jurors to understand as self defense, that is when an attack was ongoing. Thus, their acquittals may be attributed primarily to the nature of their actions, while the acquittals of non-poor women may depend more strongly on the context provided by expert testimony. Expert testimony can show how imminent danger may be perceived by a battered women who knew the nature of her partner's violence, even if he was not actively violent at the moment that she struck out.

Conclusion

This paper was informed by my growing sense that the "Battered Woman Syndrome," as it is currently defined does not represent the experiences of very poor women. The data here represent a beginning in the data-based development of modifications in the Battered Woman Syndrome. If the questions raised by the DA about Damian Pizarro's entitlement to the label of "battered woman" are indicators of real limitations in our thinking, then the importance of this work is underlined.

Table 1

A Chi-Square Test of the Relationship between

Social Class and Marital Status in Relation to the Deceased

	Marital Status		
	Married	Not Married	Total
Social Class			
Poor	16.7 (5)	83.3 (25)	52.6 (30)
Non-Poor	48.1 (13)	51.9 (14)	47.4 (27)
Total	31.6 (18)	68.4 (39)	100.0 (57)

Chi-Square = 5.14268 with 1 df, p = .023

Table 2

A Chi-Square Test of the Relationship between Social Class and Race

	Race		
	Non-White	White	Total
Social Class			
Poor	83.3 (25)	16.7 (5)	52.6 (30)
Non-Poor	59.3 (16)	40.7 (11)	47.4 (27)
Total	71.9 (41)	28.1 (16)	100.0 (57)

Chi-Square = 2.97382 with 1 df, p = .0846

Table 3

A One-Way Analysis of Variance Showing the Impact of Social Class on Educational Attainment

Source	d.f.	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F-ratio	F-prob.
Between groups	1	11.6754	11.6754	2.833	.0994
Within groups	44	181.3029	4.1205		
Total	45	192.9782			

Table 4

A Chi-Sqaure Test of the Relationship between

Social Class and Violence in the Woman's Family of Origin

	Violence in Family or Origin		
	Yes	No	Total
Social Class			
Poor	82.8 (24)	17.2 (5)	58.0 (29)
Non-Poor	52.4 (11)	47.6 (10)	42.0 (21)
Total	70.0 (35)	30.0 (15)	100.0 (50)

Chi-Square = 4.00344 with 1 df, p = .0454

Table 5

A Chi-Square Test of the Relationship between

Social Class and the Nature of the Final Episode of Violence

	The Nature of the Final Episode of Violence		
	Attack Ongoing	Not Ongoing	Total
Social Class			
Poor	93.3 (28)	6.7 (2)	53.6 (30)
Non-Poor	69.2 (18)	30.8 (8)	46.4 (26)
Total	82.1 (46)	17.9 (10)	100.0 (56)

Chi-Square = 3.99554 with 1 df, p = .0456

Table 6

A Chi-Square Test of the Relationship between

Social Class and Weapon

	Weapon		
Social Class	Knife	Gun	Total
Poor	82.8 (24)	17.2 (5)	52.7 (29)
Non-Poor	57.7 (15)	42.3 (11)	47.3 (26)
Total	70.9 (39)	29.1 (16)	100.0 (55)

Chi-Square = 3.04896 with 1 df, p = .0808

Table 7

A Chi-Square Test of the Relationship between

Social Class and the Inclusion of Expert Testimony

	Inclusion of Expert Testimony		
Social Class	Yes	No	Total
Poor	25.0 (7)	75.0 (21)	51.9 (28)
Non-Poor	53.8 (14)	46.2 (12)	48.1 (26)
Total	38.9 (21)	61.1 (33)	100.0 (54)

Chi-Square = 3.58452 with 1 df, p = .0583

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